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Rethinking Cultural History

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Theorists of post-modernism have declared the end of history in the sense that it was understood in the preceding era.[i] This does not mean, as some have understood it, that we have somehow miraculously removed ourselves from history. Rather our relation to the cultural past has been profoundly changed by technologies of reproduction and distribution. The cultural past returns to the present not as part of a grand narrative of loss or progress nor as nostalgic synecdoche for an absent whole (the ruin), but in bits and pieces, available simultaneously, taken out of context. If context is sought, it does not come as a whole story but as a narrative fragment in a hyperlink. The Derridean "archive" is increasingly on-line, and bits of the archive return as signs of rich but blurred significance in a changing fashion system.

All claims of radical change are subject to the "nothing new under the sun" critique. We should acknowledge the continuities as a way to understand the differences. The Renaissance prince with his statue of a Greek god or the Ming connoisseur with his Zhou bronze vessel both appropriated fragments of the past with the original meaning of the object radically changed. These objects, however, still held what Walter Benjamin spoke of as "aura." "Aura" is that which flickers and goes out when you discover that the thirteenth century plate you own was made two years ago or that the medieval city you visited was almost entirely rebuilt for tourists.

If the Greek statue in a renaissance garden differs from the post-modern cultural artifact because of its aura, we might find something closer to the post-modern in the mass reproduction of classical motifs in baroque ornament. The focus of attention commanded by the solitary statue dissolves in a replication of images that drifts toward decoration. The continuity helps us understand the differences. In contrast to the baroque decorative gesture to classical antiquity, we now have all eras and cultures equally available, disabling the kind of narrative of continuity implicit in European allusions to the classical past. The images available now can only function through the ubiquitous market based on structured choice. To choose is a gesture towards a vague meaning, within a paradigm of allied but opposing images with vague and different meanings.

If you go to the Maruithuis in the Hague, you can purchase an umbrella or a mouse-pad with Vermeer's "Girl With the Pearl Earring." There is a history behind how Vermeer, relatively obscure in his own lifetime, entered the canon of European art. At this particular moment the fame of this painting has been publicized by a movie named after the painting. If you go to the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam you can get your umbrella or mouse-pad imprinted with Van Gogh's "Sunflowers." This is a cultural phenomenon of some interest. The unique object with aura can be reproduced en mass on various media, each of which refers back to the unique object housed at a particular site. The technology of reproduction makes it a souvenir and more. To choose one of these things is a gesture of display of culture, a class gesture. Although these images are not fully historicized, they come with complex, if now hazy historical determinations.

The "hat" with its upturned roof atop a Chinese high-rise is a gesture to a dehistoricized idea of the Chinese cultural past. It "remembers" Chinese architectural traditions to mark the building as distinct from otherwise identical buildings in a hundred other countries. It is national tradition as a brand name, but it could be done just as easily within those hundred other countries, where it would mark the building as Chinese or East Asian. This is part of what can best be described as a post-modern multi-cultural code: in restaurant signs, in clothes design, in

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furniture design—indeed in many spheres of contemporary mass production—there are markers that are signs of nations or cultural regions: Japan, China, India, the Near East, Africa, Paris-centered Europe. They are offered to consumers to invite a multi-cultural choice.

Last spring at the AAS Joseph Allen of the University of Minnesota did a wonderful talk on Li Bai 's 床前明月光 (静夜思) and its contemporary reproductions, including on swimming suits. To wear 床前明月光 on one's clothes or one's swimwear is, like the "hat" on a high-rise, a vague gesture of cultural allegiance. It competes for consumer attention side by side with a tunic printed with quotations from the Four Books 四书 upside down, a completely equivalent icon of "Chineseness" (though one supposes that only in the West one would purchase clothes with Chinese characters upside down).

By its very name "post-modernism" locates itself sequentially within history—indeed a putatively universal history—and it remains part of the very historical system it pretends to transcend. While it is true that these images from the past come to us relatively decontextualized, each of these choices from among images of the past is overdetermined. The past is not lost in these images; it is merely blurred and reconfigured. If Li Bai's 床前明月光 (静夜思) is printed on swimming suits, it may have lost its historical meaning, but there are still historical reasons why that particular poem emerged as an icon of "Chineseness." In other words, of the approximately ten thousand Tang quatrains and the hundreds of thousands of quatrains surviving from imperial China, there are reasons why this one appears on a swimming suit. The same is true of Van Gogh's "Sunflowers" on an umbrella or mouse pad.

It is well known that in late capitalism there is a strong vested interest in expunging the history of production from all objects of consumption. We are not supposed to know the history of production of a sneaker we buy or how the chicken we ate last night lived and died. Indeed we do not want to know how and where the umbrella and mouse-pad with Van Gogh's "Sunflowers" were produced. In the case of the cultural image, however, a carefully circumscribed history is necessary to give the image value. It is the multi-cultural historical canon as objects of consumer choice. To choose to purchase an umbrella with "Sunflowers" rather than an umbrella with a Persian miniature is a consumer choice with cultural overtones rather than a statement of cultural allegiance in a struggle between European culture and neo-Islam.

It has been argued with some persuasiveness that cultural history "as we have known it" is always part of an imperial culture, or later, of a nationalist narrative. Thus to disassemble those narratives in the post-modern junkyard (to borrow Jameson's nice figure) is also to diffuse the conflicts that would implicitly grow out of such narratives. In many cases such narratives, however, brought with them of effective internal critique which have also been lost in the post-modern cultural machine. In other words, the canon of cultural commodities is more or less beyond critique. It has become stabilized by the alternatives in a market of choices. A hyperlink version of historical context is a supplement to advertising. It is a remarkably stable system.

Let us take an umbrella with an Utamaro print reprinted. There are rich ironies: the "original" was itself a reproduction, commercial art destined for as wide as possible distribution in the technology of reproduction of the age. The history of the canonization of this art is tied to Europe even more than Japan. It has entered many narratives of art; it is canon. On the umbrella, however, it a sign of "traditional Japan." It is the visible equivalent of ordering yakitori. It has not been entirely stripped of history, but its history is radically contained and controlled.

We cannot, I believe, return to cultural history in the old sense, whether that is a nostalgic narrative of loss or a triumphant narrative of progress. Pieces of it lie all around us, but those pieces no longer join into an encompassing totality that commands belief. Perhaps there are too many narrative fragments in circulation. This is, however, an alternative way of conceiving cultural history—one that eludes the traditional linear narrative, but reattaches our peculiar present to the past.

Let me begin with a simple paradox achieved by combining two truisms of historicism. The first truism is that we cannot know the past except as mediated by the interests of the present. The second truism is that the interests of the present are in some way determined by the past. This leaves us with a circular argument, an uncomfortable conundrum of historical determinism. If we cannot escape this conundrum, we can examine the processes by which both hold true.

This alternative version of cultural history encourages us not to think of the past as discreet moments, with its artifacts as a synecdoche of lost totalities that can be organized into narrative. Rather it is to think of the past as continuous processes that link "then" and "now," with the understanding that our connection to "then" is radically mediated by those intermediate processes. The past—particularly the more remote past—already comes to us cut up

and reconfigured by intervening centuries. In many cases we cannot even get close to the "then" that we have used in our cultural narratives. We cannot, for example, really study the Tang in its own right because the Tang has already been serially constructed by our predecessors. This kind of cultural history can never be written as total narrative. 床前明月光 is neither decoration nor does it come simply from Li Bai in the reign of Xuanzong; it is part of an ongoing process of using Tang poetry and placing Li Bai in the canon of Tang poetry. In the talk mentioned earlier, Joseph allen offers credible reasons why this poem has been singled out as a contemporary icon of Chinese poetry: its inclusion in the beginner's anthology Tangshi sanbaishou; its use as the first poem children memorize, thus giving it particular resonance in the Chinese diaspora, where children may not memorize many other poems; its reference to thinking of one home, which evokes Chinese origins. The argument requires two supplements. First, the poem has a continuous history out of which it emerged as an icon; second, this weight of history and significance becomes blurred in its transformation into decoration.

The problem with engaging the theoretical issue with cultural history here is that it requires an archeology of any given cultural artifact in circulation; and when doing archeological work, one's focus is necessarily local. We want to show that the artifact taken as an icon for and synecdoche of a moment in the cultural past does not come directly from that moment but in some fundamental sense "is" the continuous history of its reuse. At each succeeding moment the artifact is received already transformed by preceding moments—augmented, truncated, given new meanings. This is not reception theory; rather, it suggests that as texts are returned to the archive they are already changed for the next user. At the end of this exercise, I will return to the implications of this mode of historical understanding for cultural history in the present.

To treat the cultural traces of the past as cumulatively mediated by their futures—futures that include historical contingencies as well as identifiable motives—disables historical narrative of a certain kind. It also refines the historical paradox of which I spoke earlier. We can no longer innocently say that the interpretation of the past is mediated by the interests of the present, because the materials of the past and their received configurations and values, are given to us already constructed, often by motives that are no longer important or long forgotten.

I want to take up an example of the way in which subsequent ages have intervened in the construction of a text from the past and how those sedimented interventions have effectively become historical reality. The case I will use is the anonymous "old poems," attributed to the Han Dynasty. They have been an important part of a cultural narrative and taken as a foundational text in the history of Chinese poetry. They have a place in every college anthology of Chinese literature and in every literary history; they are also included in various collections of "appreciations," which have a solid popular market, purchased by adults both for themselves and for their children as a way of developing familiarity with "traditional Chinese culture." Although I would be not at all surprised to find one of these poems on a swimming suit (though considering the content of some, it would a peculiar combination), the situation I am describing is modern rather than post-modern, with the "Nineteen Old Poems" as a component of state-supported national culture and an open market promise of social status through cultural betterment.

In the standard narrative of the history of Chinese poetry, the position of the anonymous "old poems" represents just such intermediate mobility, conventionally placed later than the anonymous *yuefu* that are from the "folk," and the known writers of the Jian'an period, who belonged to Cao Cao's court. The poems are supposed to be the voiced of anonymous literary men, responding to the disintegration of Han civilization. They thus hold a place in a structured cultural narrative, which moves from the common people, up through the lower gentry, to the elite; it is a story of the social mobility of a genre moving from plainness toward opulent ornamentation, followed by eventual decadence, and fall.

These "old poems" belong very much to their moment in the cultural narrative, and much of their immense attraction comes from their place in the story. If, however, we look at history in other terms—not as moments but as continuous processes—we find something very different. I do not have the space here to outline the process in full detail, but I will try to sketch the highlights.

The first thing we must observe in the case of the anonymous "old poems" is that we do not really know when they originated. They could be Eastern Han before the Jian'an as is usually supposed; they could be from the Jian'an itself; they could be later. What we do know is that a number of them were in circulation by the end the third century, when Lu Ji imitated them pretty much line by line. While to some it may matter little whether the poems come from around 140 A.D. or 240 A.D., the later date would change their sequence and thus their meaning in a cultural narrative with great resonance.

In the second decade of the fourth century non-Han peoples invaded North China, and in 317 a remnant of the Jin court and a large number aristocratic families and their retainers reestablished the Jin Dynasty south of the Yangzi River. We don't know what happened to the manuscripts of the "old poems," their versions and how widely they circulated. The "old poems" seem to have had a degree of popularity in the fifth century, the period when we first begin to have accounts of the history of poetry in the five syllable line, the form of the anonymous "old poems." These early accounts, however, do not mention the "old poems," and they begin the story of poetry with the Jian'an. S.

Interest in the history of poetry increased, and two phenomena contributed to "placing" the old poems. First, there were a group of poems in the five syllable line attributed to a known figure, Li Ling, who lived around the turn of the first century B.C. Although doubts about the authenticity of this attribution were voiced in the first part of the fifth century, literary scholars around the turn of the sixth century were inclined to accept this attribution (which is now pretty much universally rejected). If earlier accounts of poetry began with the Jian'an, around the turn of the third century A.D., now the beginning of poetry in the five syllable line had been pushed almost three centuries earlier. The second phenomenon is that poems and authors, in anthologies and accounts of the history of poetry, were arranged in chronological order. This created a problem for anonymous poems of unknown date; they had to be placed either at the beginning or the end of a chronological sequence. Since the poems were already known as "old poems," the natural place to put them was at the beginning of a chronological sequence. Thus we had a "known" poet from the turn of the first century B.C., preceded by the anonymous "old poems." In a chronological regime, this gave the strong impression that the "old poems" came from the Western Han.

Up to this point I have tried to use the phrase "anonymous old poems" in order to avoid the familiar "Nineteen Old Poems." The reason I do so is because there were not nineteen; in the manuscript that the early sixth century critic Zhong Rong saw, there were fifty-nine. That is, there were more than three times as many anonymous "old poems."

> The fourteen pieces that Lu Ji imitated are rich and beautiful in style, and in their sense, moving and far-reaching. They startle mind and spirit—one may even claim that each word is worth a thousand pieces of silver. As for the forty-five others, including "Those departed grow daily further from us," even though they are filled with painful resentment, they are very much a mixed bag. People used to suspect that they were written by the Caos and Wang ［Can］ in the Jian'an. "A traveler came from afar" and "The orange shows flower and fruit" are also quite remarkable.

We have here both the highest praise for some of the "old poems," along with a sense that many poems in this collection somehow didn't belong: it was a "mixed bag." In other words, Zhong Rong read this corpus of poems with a prior sense of how "old poems" *should* sound. The "mixed bag" (*zongza*) suggests the inclusion of pieces that seemed somehow inauthentic. Elsewhere Zhong Rong affirms his belief that the "old poems" are Western Han, and we have every reason to suspect that the poems Zhong Rong approved were ones that seemed like they might be early.

The "old poems" that Zhong Rong approved and those mentioned approvingly by other together make up the large majority of the "Nineteen Old Poems" selected by Xiao Tong for his anthology the *Wen xuan*. We do not have direct evidence for the literary and cultural history of the uncertain earlier era in which the "old poems" were produced; we have the selection made by those who had decided when the old poems were composed and had chosen based on their sense of what such poems ought to sound like.

We should also note that the core of the "Nineteen Old Poems" consisted of the poems Lu Ji imitated at the end of the third century. In other words, in the sixth century, when Lu Ji loomed large as a great writer of the past, these anonymous old poems were paired with ornamented, rhetorical works by a known writer, thus instantiating the process of movement from the plain to the ornamented. Few now read Lu Ji's imitations, but it is worth remembering that most of the very famous "Nineteen Old Poems" were chosen *because* Lu Ji imitated them. In at least two cases it is clear that he imitated poems that were different from the versions available two centuries later.

The texts in the archive have come to use already selected and shaped for a cultural narrative created for local motives from centuries after the time when the texts were produced. These scholars of the early sixth century, the Qi and Liang, were writing a cultural history that led directly to themselves. They ruled only the South, with a minority of the population. There was something at stake in the story they told: Han culture moved south when they did; the North, the old heartland of Chinese culture, was barbarous and irrelevant.

Beginning in the middle of the sixth century, the North gradually conquered the South, piece by piece; and they had to assimilate the intellectual world of the South. By and large they accepted the confident account of cultural history given by the Southerners. Indeed, they turned it to their purposes, making the South the now decadent inheritor of Han culture, in contrast to the Northerners' return to vigorous simplicity. The Han model was central to the vision of the dynasties that reunified China, the short-lived Sui and the more enduring Tang. The great Southern anthology *Wen xuan* became canonical and carried unparalleled authority in the Tang.

For the first part of the Tang the anonymous "old poems" were loosely associated with what the Tang called the "old style," which was invested with a moral seriousness articulated against Tang aristocratic culture, strongly influence by earlier Southern culture. Such moral seriousness, opposed to the frivolousness of more aesthetically crafted verse, had been largely (though not entirely) absent in the Southern Dynasties understanding of the "old poems."

The "Nineteen Old Poems" were never forgotten, but by the ninth century they had ceased to be an important force in contemporary poetry. More recent poetry, the poetry of the Tang itself, had largely come to define scope of poetry. This remained largely true in the Song Dynasty as well. There are no extant anthologies of pre-Tang poetry, and in the extensive corpus of Song critical writing the attention given to the "Nineteen Old Poems" is minimal in comparison to the attention given to Tang and contemporary poetry.

The gradual shaping of the "old poems" into their contemporary place among the icons of Chinese literary and cultural history cannot be fully separated from the fate of the anonymous *yuefu*. *Yuefu*, loosely translated as "musical poetry" (though it had long lost its association with music) came in various forms, including anonymous lyrics declared in some part to be Han in the late fifth century and lyrics by known writers. Around the turn of the twelfth century, toward the end of the Northern Song, Guo Maoqian undertook a scholarly project to gather together all the *yuefu* through the Tang. *Yuefu* were not generally popular among Song poets, and this was a scholarly enterprise rather than a popular anthology. Although these works had been earlier available, texts from scattered sources, many of which were subsequently lost, were brought together in one place.

It is hard to date exactly when a renewed interest in so-called "Han and Wei" poetry began; it was probably in the thirteenth century. By the fourteenth century it was well established and continued to grow into the sixteenth century. Anthologies and compendia were produced, and the level of critical comment increased dramatically. This renewed interest in early poetry, in which the anonymous *yuefu* and the "old poems" played a prominent role, was decidedly primitivistic. Moreover, in some quarters this interest was clearly associated with the North, as a way of responding to the cultural refinement of the great urban centers of South China.

The anonymous *yuefu* were part of this new account of early poetry, taken as contemporary or earlier than the anonymous "old poems." Here we first find the core of the modern account, with poetry moving from the "folk" to anonymous lower gentry and at last to the poetry by known authors around the turn of the third century. The actual evidence for this sequence and the relative dating is slim at best; but it was repeated in numerous anthologies and critical comments so often that it came to seem self-evidently true. This poetry had a sense of manly virtue attached to it. In roughly this form the anonymous old poems entered the Republican school system as part of a new story of national culture.

Something of the flavor of the cultural ideology around the "old poems" can be seen from the following comment by the Ming critic and poet Xie Zhen (1495-1575):

> The "Nineteen Old Poems" just say things out in an ordinary way, and there is no effort in the words. It's like a young student talking in everyday language with a friend, without any self-consciousness. For example, "A traveler came from far away, / and brought a paired carp. / I called to my boy to cook the carp, / and there was a letter inside." When the student passes the examination with the highest honors, he learns to speak the dialect of officialdom (*guanhua*) and becomes mannered. He is full of himself and no longer as he was when at home. For example, Cao Zhi's "The swimming fish hides down in green waters, / the soaring bird flies brushing the sky. / When first I left, harsh frost was forming, / coming back now, white dew dries in the sun."

Cao Zhi was the most famous poet of the Jian'an and early Wei, the early third century. Xie Zhen gives us a narrative of natural innocence to the falseness of high status (though he allows in the passage that follows that Cao Zhi is still half speaking "everyday language" in comparison to the poets who followed him).

The Ming version of the "old poems" built on the version created in the Qi and Liang, just as the modern version builds on the Ming version. Cultural history is cumulative. The Ming went back and recovered other pieces of

anonymous old poetry, a few of which passed muster and entered the canon; but these could only be read against the standards set by the "Nineteen Old Poems." New stories are told on top of old stories whose point has been forgotten, but leaving traces of values and significance in the works. The poems are that history. They do not represent the "Han and Wei" but a continuous remaking of that period.

This is the first and most basic way in which the past comes to us mediated by its future, which may still be far in our past. The Derridean motif of the "archive" is prestructured and preselected, often for the sake of the cultural narratives that are told from it. In the same way our "Greek drama" is almost entirely restricted to the canon established by the Alexandrian critics, and we have it because the Alexandrian canon entered the Byzantine school system. We know that the plays selected were often not the plays that won the prizes. And the sands of Egypt have given us fragments of others that remind us how much more diverse the whole was.

Accident and material culture also shape the archive. If you write on clay or on papyrus in dry Egypt, the traces of culture survive even if the culture itself disappears. If you write on bark or palm leaves in a wet climate, the traces do not survive, unless you have continuous generations of copyists. The Shang and Zhou exist for us primarily in bronze and jade and pottery—history is often based on hard things. We know from texts of a rich world of Tang wall painting—landscapes and cranes—but Tang art survives in Buddhist statuary, in dry only semi-Chinese Dunhuang, and in a few imperial tombs.

It might seem that archeologically recovered artifacts, however contingent their survival may be, are direct contacts with the past, unmediated by the sedimentation of historical reuse that I have described. But once they emerge into history, they enter that history of debate and the cumulative motives of the present.

The television series *Daming gongci* is a wonderfully hybrid contemporary Tang, in which long traditions of Chinese history-telling meet film traditions that are already a layering of Hollywood and Russian film, long domesticated in China. One way in which *Daming gongci* is interesting is in the attempt to use archeologically recovered images to represent the period (along with some striking anachronisms). The makers had obviously studied Tang tomb murals. The maidservants stand in the background in poses obviously modeled on those paintings, with reasonably good facsimiles of the hair and clothing. There is, however, one striking difference. Tang women shaved their eyebrows and painted eyebrow designs on their foreheads. The women in *Daming gongci* all have their own eyebrows. I hope it is obvious that the same principle is at work here that we saw in Zhong Rong's response to the large corpus of anonymous "old poems": some elements are the version of the past one wants; some are not. When we see another series, Da Tang qingshi, obviously borrowing from *Daming gongci*, we can see that a modern "film Tang" has been created, one that selectively replaces images of the real Tang.

A close variation is the white marble statue of European classical antiquity. We know that these statues were brightly painted. The actual goal for the Greeks seems to have been more like wax museum realism than white purity of form. Time took away the paint from the statues as it turned the Shang bronzes green. The white marble statue has become an icon of Greek and Roman antiquity, and in representations of the period the statues are almost always white. The reproduction of imitations, in plaster and plastic, continues to reconfirm the image, and the unpainted sculpture has become so much the norm in whatever medium that it has become an aesthetic of form entirely independent of the accidents of historical contingency that inspired it.

It is well known in art that the imitation can seem more "real" than the actual thing. I believe it can be shown clearly in some cases that in the sixth century anthology *Yutai xinyong* Xu Ling took the problematic old *yuefu* of the "Treatise on Music," *Yuezhi*, of the *Song shu* and changed them to suit sixth century taste. The Xu Ling versions were much more attractive as poems. The result was that when Guo Maoqian compiled the *Yuefu* shiji around the turn of the twelfth century and put the two versions side by side, he concluded that the *Yutai xinyong* versions were the "original lyrics" and the *Song shu* versions were "arranged by the Jin musicians." Certainly in the history of Chinese poetry the *Yutai xinyong* versions have effectively "become" the original versions, dated to the Han on the slimmest evidence. They have acquired a stability in a cultural narrative.

Even if, for good reasons, we change the priority and acknowledge that the *Song shu* versions of the *yuefu* are earlier, that does not make them the "original" version; it makes them only the "earliest" extant versions, themselves shaped and selected for now forgotten motives. We cannot get back to the beginning. Attempts at "authenticity" simply use the archive for new purposes which are built on old purposes.

Even the ignored past text cannot escape for it too is placed in a context that is already charged with historical inertia. Apart from the two famous pieces in the *Wen xuan*, Cao Cao's poetry was largely ignored until the Yuan and Ming. When it began to attract the attention of readers, it was in a period when Three Kingdoms plays were popular

and when Three Kingdoms stories were taking on print form. Even if we avoid the temptation to ascribe cause here (with a classical poet becoming famous because of vernacular literature), Cao Cao's poetic emergence from the archive was in a period in which his poetry was already animated by a popular image of Cao Cao.

Such a view of cultural and literary history constituted of artifacts with serial historical determinations is not hard to understand, and we take many aspects of this for granted. To take this serious disables the grand conventional narratives of cultural history. The moments from the past that we would use in such a story have already been reshaped for serial use, often across long spans of history. We have neither a truly "present" story of historical culture nor a transparent account of "how it really was." We have bits and pieces of old stories fused with the texts, stories told for reasons that no longer matter.

I have just told a story about how a group of texts, the anonymous "old poems," were shaped and given new meanings over history. Local stories are still possible; on this level we can have, if not cultural history itself, a slice of the cultural history of cultural history. But it will always be the post-modern fragment, at best gesturing to a whole that remains out of sight.

Refernce

[i] To say that we, in this period of transition, are witnessing the end of history "as we have known it," is not as cataclysmic as it might seem. History "as we have known it" is itself a historical phenomenon whose origins date only to the second half of the eighteenth century.